MARVEL

1

STAR WARS

HIDDEN EMPIRE

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STAR WARS

HIDDEN EMPIRE

PART 1

"A MATTER OF TIME"

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Beyond the reign.

IN THE DAYS OF THE GALACTIC EMPIRE, *LADY QI'RA*, RULER OF A POWERFUL CRIMINAL SYNDICATE KNOWN AS *CRIMSON DAWN*...

...HAD ENTERED INTO A SECRET WAR AGAINST THE TWO *SITH LORDS* WHO CONTROLLED THE GALAXY.

HER GOAL WAS NOT TO DEPOSE THEM AND TAKE CONTROL OF THE EMPIRE HERSELF, THOUGH SHE BELIEVED IN POWER.

HER QUARREL WAS WITH *ABSOLUTE* POWER.

ESPECIALLY WHEN THAT POWER WAS HELD BY THOSE WHO USED CRUELTY, FEAR AND INJUSTICE AS THEIR PRIMARY TOOLS.

QI'RA WANTED *DARTH SIDIOUS* AND *DARTH VADER* DEAD.

SHE SPENT MANY YEARS TRYING TO ACHIEVE THAT GOAL.

IF ONLY QI'RA HADN'T TRIED TO DO THIS ALL BY HERSELF. IF ONLY SHE HADN'T KEPT IT ALL SO *SECRET*.

MAYBE WE COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING TO HELP HER.

SHE NEVER STRUCK ME AS THE TRUSTING TYPE. MY IMPRESSION WAS THAT WITH THE LIFE SHE LED, THE ONLY PERSON SHE FELT SHE COULD RELY ON...

...WAS HERSELF.

THIS IS THE END OF LADY QI'RA'S *CRIMSON REIGN*.

"ALL ACROSS THE GALAXY, THE AGENTS OF CRIMSON DAWN, DEEPLY HIDDEN IN ALL THE GREAT POWER BASES, WERE TOLD TO CAUSE ***CHAOS***.

"IMPERIALS, REBELS, CRIMINALS, SLICERS, KILLERS, SMUGGLERS, POLITICIANS AND MECHANICS, FINANCIERS AND MERCHANTS AND MINERS...

"WHATEVER COULD BE DONE TO CAUSE TROUBLE FOR THE EMPIRE, TO DIVERT PALPATINE'S ATTENTION, THEY WOULD DO.

"SHE ASKED ALL THOSE PEOPLE TO TAKE EXTRAORDINARY RISKS--AND MOST OF THEM DID.

"THAT WAS THE POWER OF THE VISION SHE SOLD THEM--OF A MORE EQUAL GALAXY, OF A FREER PLACE.

"OR MAYBE THAT'S JUST HOW ***BAD*** IT WAS FOR THEM UNDER PALPATINE'S REIGN.

"SHE HAD AGENTS ALL OVER THE GALAXY, BUT ALSO HAD ELITE TEAMS WORKING ON MORE SPECIALIZED TASKS MORE CONNECTED TO HER SPECIFIC PLANS TO DESTROY THE SITH.

"AND OF ALL THOSE TASKS, THE MOST IMPORTANT..."

"THIS IS HOW SHE ENDED IT.

WHEREVER YOU ARE, EMPEROR SHEEV PALPATINE, DARTH SIDIOUS, DARK LORD OF THE SITH...

...THIS IS MY ***HIDDEN EMPIRE***.

CHOKE ON IT.

"QI'RA'S PLAN UNFOLDED IN MANY STAGES, AND AS IT NEARED ITS ENDGAME, SHE BEGAN TO MOVE MORE DIRECTLY AGAINST PALPATINE AND HIS REGIME.

"ASSASSINATIONS, SHADOW WARS, DISRUPTION, ALL DESIGNED TO MAKE THE EMPEROR DOUBT THE UNASSAILABILITY OF HIS POSITION. TO ***FEAR***.

"BUT SHEEV PALPATINE WAS NOT A FOOL.

"WHEN QI'RA REALIZED THIS, SHE KNEW SHE HAD TO BUY AS MUCH TIME AS SHE COULD. SO... SHE ACTIVATED HER PEOPLE.

"HE WAS WILY AND OLD AND HAD OUTLIVED MANY WHO HAD TRIED TO COME AGAINST HIM.

"HIS OWN INVESTIGATIONS REVEALED THAT QI'RA AND CRIMSON DAWN WERE ***HUNTING*** HIM FROM THE SHADOWS.

...WAS MINE.

A CENTRAL ELEMENT OF QI'RA'S PLAN WAS USING THE SITH'S GREATEST WEAPON AGAINST THEM--***THE DARK SIDE OF THE FORCE.***

"QI'RA INHERITED CRIMSON DAWN FROM ITS FORMER RULER, A DARK SIDE ADEPT NAMED ***MAUL.***

"FROM HIM, SHE GATHERED A SENSE OF THE TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES THAT MIGHT PREVAIL AGAINST LORDS PALPATINE AND VADER.

"MAUL WAS LONG DEAD, ALONG WITH MOST OF THE GALAXY'S DARK SIDE PRACTITIONERS--EVEN THOSE ***AWARE*** OF THE FORCE.

"PALPATINE HAD SEEN TO THAT.

"BUT SCRAPS OF KNOWLEDGE REMAINED, AND QI'RA TRACKED DOWN AS MANY OF THEM AS SHE COULD.

"THE PATH OF HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE LED TO AN ARTIFACT, LONG THOUGHT LOST, CALLED THE ***FERMATA CAGE.***

"IN THE HANDS OF A POWERFUL DARK SIDE USER, IT COULD ACHIEVE EXTRAORDINARY THINGS.

"QI'RA DID NOT HAVE A POWERFUL DARK SIDE USER.

"SHE HAD THE *KNIGHTS OF REN.*

"EVEN THEIR STRONGEST IN THE FORCE WAS BARELY A WHISPER AGAINST THE SCREAM THE SITH COULD MUSTER.

"BUT AFTER PALPATINE'S *PURGES*... THEY WERE WHAT QI'RA HAD.

AND OF COURSE... SHE HAD *ME.*

"I WAS ONE OF THE GALAXY'S FINAL REPOSITORIES OF THE HISTORY OF THE FORCE, AS FAR AS I KNEW. THE *LAST ARCHIVIST.*

"QI'RA HAD TASKED ME WITH UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF THE FERMATA CAGE, WITH THE KNIGHTS ON CALL TO OFFER THE DARK SIDE TO ME AS NEEDED.

"SUPPOSEDLY.

CAN ONE OF YOU COME HERE? I WANT TO SEE IF TOUCHING THIS THING WITH THE FORCE WILL HELP IT DO ANYTHING.

MAYBE YOU MISSED THE *NAP?* I THOUGHT I WAS VERY *OBVIOUSLY* NAPPING.

"THEY'D ALREADY LOST TWO OF THEIR TEAM IN PURSUIT OF QI'RA'S PLAN. I THINK THEY WERE DISINCLINED TO HELP MUCH MORE WITHOUT GOOD CAUSE.

ALLOW *ME* TO OFFER MY ASSISTANCE.

"I HAD TO BRING IN AN EXPERT OF MY OWN, SOMEONE WHO KNEW THINGS I DID NOT-- *KHO PHON FARRUS.*

"LONG AGO, A STRANGE SECT KNOWN AS THE *ASCENDANT* ATTEMPTED TO REPLICATE THE POWERS OF THE DARK SIDE USING TECHNOLOGY.

"KHO KNEW MORE ABOUT THE ASCENDANT THAN ANYONE ALIVE. THEY WERE VERY USEFUL IN PATCHING OVER THE HOLES IN MY OWN UNDERSTANDING.

"I THREW EVERY IDEA I HAD AGAINST THE FERMATA CAGE. THE FORCE, DROID TECHNOLOGY, THE TOOLS OF THE ASCENDANT.

"THINGS GOT RATHER...

"...ELABORATE."

LITTLE OF THIS WENT UNNOTICED.

PALPATINE ALREADY KNEW QI'RA WAS HIS ENEMY.

THIS WAS NOT GOOD.

GENERALLY SPEAKING, PALPATINE'S ENEMIES HAD ONE THING IN COMMON.

"THEY DIED.

NONE OF YOU LIKE TO THINK OF YOURSELVES AS *SERVANTS*.

YOU ARE *PROUD*. YOU HAVE CARVED OUT DOMINIONS FOR YOURSELVES IN THE *DARK*, WON BATTLES OF FIRE AND BLOOD.

YOU HAVE TERRITORY, WEALTH, FOLLOWERS DEDICATED TO FULFILLING YOUR EVERY WHIM!

BUT THIS IS *MY* EMPIRE. EVERYTHING YOU HAVE IS DUE TO *MY* INDULGENCE.

YOU *DO* SERVE.

AND *SERVE YOU WILL.*

THE HUTTS, BLACK SUN, THE PYKES, THE DROID GOTRA, ZEREK BESH... THE GALAXY'S GREAT CRIMINAL FAMILIES.

FOR *MONTHS*, YOU HAVE ALL BEEN ENGAGED IN A *POINTLESS WAR* AGAINST EACH OTHER.

YOU BELIEVED THIS WAS A METHOD BY WHICH YOU COULD GAIN MY FAVOR.

YOU WERE *LIED TO.*

ALL THAT FIGHTING, ALL THAT EXPENSE, ALL THAT *WASTE*... IT WAS BECAUSE THE ONE AMONG YOUR NUMBER YOU DO NOT SEE HERE TODAY *WANTED IT SO.*

CRIMSON DAWN. *LADY QI'RA.*

INDEED.

YOU WILL TURN THE ENERGY YOU SPENT FIGHTING EACH OTHER TOWARD FIGHTING *HER* AND HER *PATHETIC* ORGANIZATION. MAKE NO DEALS WITH HER. GIVE HER NO SAFE HAVEN.

THE ONE WHO BRINGS ME HER CORPSE WILL RISE HIGH IN MY ESTIMATION.

"PALPATINE USED EVERY TOOL AT HIS DISPOSAL TO ROOT OUT THE CRIMSON DAWN AGENTS HE KNEW WERE PRESENT IN HIS OWN RANKS.

"FROM THE CRUEL ENFORCERS OF HIS *INFERNO SQUAD*...

"...TO *LORD VADER* HIMSELF.

"HE HAD HUNTED THE *JEDI ORDER* TO EXTINCTION. QI'RA'S PEOPLE REQUIRED ONLY THE MEREST OF EFFORT.

"ACROSS THE EMPIRE, ALL PORTS WERE CLOSED TO CRIMSON DAWN.

"BOUNTIES WERE SET FOR ITS AGENTS.

"NO PLANET WAS SAFE.

"THE IMPERIAL FLEET WAS PUT ON HIGH ALERT SEARCHING FOR THE CRIMSON DAWN FLAGSHIP, THE BEAUTIFUL *VERMILLION*.

"QI'RA HID.

"BUT THE EMPIRE'S RESOURCES WERE VAST.

"THEY FOUND HER, AS SHE HAD TO KNOW THEY WOULD."

BLAST IT.

THIS ISN'T GOOD, QI'RA. THEY BROUGHT AN *INTERDICTOR*. THAT MEANS WE CAN'T GET PAST THEM, CAN'T GET TO HYPERSPACE.

I SUPPOSE WE SHOULD BE FLATTERED, *CHANATH*. THE EMPIRE DOESN'T HAVE MANY INTERDICTORS.

THEY WANT US BADLY ENOUGH TO PULL OUT THE *BIG GUNS*.

GETTING A COMMS REQUEST. I DON'T GET IT. WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO TALK TO US ABOUT?

IF WE'RE *TALKING, SEAR*, THEN WE'RE NOT *SHOOTING*.

I CAN ACHIEVE MORE WITH A *CONVERSATION* THAN I EVER COULD WITH A BLASTER.

THAT SAID... CHANATH CHA, YOU AND YOUR *ORPHANS* SHOULD GET READY TO FIGHT.

I'LL GIVE YOU COMMAND AUTHORITY OVER CRIMSON DAWN FORCES. IF I GIVE THE ORDER, HIT THEM AS HARD AS YOU CAN.

WILL DO. I'LL START WORKING ON A STRATEGY. *IMARA*, YOU GET THE...

GUNS. YEP. ON IT, CHANATH.

REQUEST: I ALSO WOULD LIKE TO GET THE GUNS.

BE MY GUEST, *LADYBRIGHT*, BUT FIRST, GET ME A SECURE LINE, SOMETHING THE IMPERIALS CAN'T *SLICE*.

I'LL NEED YOU TO KEEP IT OPEN WHILE I'M TALKING TO THE EMPIRE.

OPENING A CHANNEL. BUT I TRULY AM SERIOUS ABOUT THE GUNS.

SAVA SUN. TELL ME YOU'RE READY.

UH... DEFINE *READY.*

YOU NEED TO ACTIVATE THE FERMATA CAGE ON MY SIGNAL. I DON'T CARE IF IT DOES EVERYTHING WE'RE HOPING FOR YET.

BUT IT *HAS TO WORK.*

HOW MUCH TIME DO I HAVE?

TEN MINUTES. AT MOST.

WELL, FIFTEEN WOULD BE BETTER. FIFTEEN *YEARS* WOULD BE BETTER.

YOU DON'T HAVE IT.

I'LL BUY YOU AS MUCH TIME AS I CAN--BUT IT WON'T BE MUCH, AND WHAT I'LL HAVE TO DO WILL COST ME A GREAT DEAL.

SO *DO NOT FAIL.*

I... ALL RIGHT, QI'RA. WE'LL GET IT DONE.

MAY THE FORCE BE WITH ME.

LADY QI'RA OF CRIMSON DAWN.

LORD VADER TOLD ME YOU WERE *FORMIDABLE*-- AN ALMOST *UNPRECEDENTED* COMPLIMENT FROM ONE SUCH AS HIM.

I AM DISAPPOINTED TO LEARN THAT YOU ARE ALSO *FOOLISH*.

ANYONE WHO EVER ACCUSED ME OF THAT LEARNED OTHERWISE IN TIME, EMPEROR.

OFTEN TO THEIR SORROW.

WHAT *ELSE* WOULD YOU CALL SOMEONE WHO WILLINGLY SEEKS THE ENMITY OF THE SITH?

ESPECIALLY ONE WHO KNOWS US AS YOU CLEARLY DO. I WOULD HAVE THOUGHT MAUL HAD TAUGHT YOU AN APPROPRIATE LEVEL OF...*FEAR*.

MAUL TAUGHT ME *MANY* THINGS, EMPEROR.

I'M SURE. HE THOUGHT HIMSELF RATHER CUNNING, THE IDIOT.

WELL, NOW THAT YOU HAVE THE ATTENTION OF THE SITH, LADY QI'RA...

...WHAT WILL YOU DO?

IT'S SIMPLE ENOUGH, *DARTH SIDIOUS*.

"WHATEVER I HAVE TO."

THE CRIMSON DAWN FLAGSHIP IS ENTERING AN ATTACK TRAJECTORY. ORDER THE INTERDICTOR CREW TO ACTIVATE ITS GRAVITY-WELL PROJECTORS SO THE CRIMINALS CAN'T ESCAPE.

AND INFORM THE EMPEROR.

IMMEDIATELY, ADMIRAL.

YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO ATTACK MY SHIPS? YOU WILL BE DESTROYED INSTANTLY.

THERE IS NO NEED FOR THIS. I WILL ADMIT...YOU HAVE INTRIGUED ME. THERE IS POSSIBILITY HERE.

DO NOT THROW YOUR LIFE AWAY.

YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND, DO YOU?

YOU DON'T GET TO TELL ME WHAT TO DO.

I DO NOT RECOGNIZE YOUR AUTHORITY. MY VOICE WAS NOT HEARD WHEN YOU ***STOLE*** THIS GALAXY.

YOU CONFUSE AUTHORITY WITH POWER-- AND MINE OVER YOURS NO LESS REAL, WHETHER YOU ACKNOWLEDGE IT OR NOT.

YOU DISAPPOINT ME, QI'RA.

DO YOU NOT REALIZE WHO YOU ALIGNED YOURSELF WITH? MAUL'S LIFE WAS DEFINED BY ONE ESSENTIAL QUALITY.

HE WAS NOT... QUITE...

...***GOOD ENOUGH.***

YOU ARE THE CHILD OF A ***POISONED LINEAGE***. ONCE MY GAZE TURNED FROM MAUL, I LOST ALL INTEREST IN HIM.

AND NOW THAT I HAVE TAKEN YOUR MEASURE...I HAVE LOST ALL INTEREST IN YOU.

IS THAT SO, SIDIOUS?

WE'LL SEE.

WELL, THAT'S QI'RA'S SIGNAL.

GUESS WE'RE REALLY GOING TO DO THIS.

LOVE THAT CONFIDENCE.

IT'LL WORK, REN. BETWEEN KHO'S ASCENDANT TECH AND MY OWN RESEARCH...IT'LL WORK.

JUST MAKE SURE YOU AND THE OTHER KNIGHTS HIT IT WITH EVERY BIT OF THE DARK SIDE YOU CAN MUSTER WHEN I FLIP THE SWITCH.

SO MUCH SHADOW, IT'LL FEEL LIKE AN *ECLIPSE*. WE'LL DO OUR BIT.

NOT LIKE WE HAVEN'T *ALREADY*.

HEY, LOOK AT THE THING. THE FURIOUS CAGE OR WHATEVER.

I THINK IT'S *EXCITED*.

YOU READY, KHO?

AS READY AS I CAN BE. A LOT OF THIS STUFF HASN'T BEEN USED IN HUNDREDS OF YEARS. THOUSANDS, MAYBE.

FABULOUS.

ALL RIGHT, EVERYONE--WHEN I HIT THIS...

...GO!

KCHK

WELL.

WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT?

NYYYARGH!

A... DISTURBANCE.

MAUL TAUGHT YOU TO CLOUD YOUR MIND, BUT I *WILL KNOW.* WHAT HAVE YOU *DONE?*

I TOLD YOU, SIDIOUS.

WHATEVER I HAVE TO.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!

YOU KEPT THE SCREAMING KEY IN *VADER'S FORTRESS* ON *MUSTAFAR*, BUT YOU HAD NO IDEA WHAT IT WAS FOR--OR THE LOCK IT OPENED.

I DID.

"IT UNLOCKED THE FERMATA CAGE."

I'VE NEVER SEEN... THE EQUIPMENT IS GOING INTO THE RED!

HOLD ON! JUST HOLD ON!

I THINK...IT'S... *WORKING!!!*

AAAAAGH!

YOU *LIE.*

YOU ARE *LYING* TO ME.

HKK!

OH DEAR.

KZZZCK

AAAGH!

NNNGH!

SAVA SUN! I CAN'T DO THIS... ALONE!

GET *UP*, YOU OLD CRONE!

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GET... ***PERSONAL***... ABOUT IT... KHO.

I'M COMING.

KILL ME... AND YOU'LL NEVER KNOW... THE *TRUTH.*

=GASP!=

SPEAK.

YOU KNOW WHAT THE FERMATA CAGE CAN DO--FREEZE INDIVIDUAL MOMENTS, USE THE DARK SIDE TO SUSPEND PEOPLE AND PLACES IN TIME *FOREVER.*

WHAT CAN BE FROZEN...CAN BE *THAWED.*

AGES AGO, LOST TO HISTORY, AN ANCIENT *SITH LORD* WAS SEALED AWAY BY THE FERMATA CAGE. MAUL *FOUND THEM.*

HE WANTED TO *FREE* THEM AND THEN SIT BACK AND WATCH AS THEY CAME FOR YOU.

AFTER ALL...THERE CAN BE ONLY TWO.

WHERE HE FAILED, I WILL *SUCCEED.* I HAVE ALREADY BEGUN. YOU KNOW IT'S TRUE. YOU CAN *SENSE* IT.

AND THE BEST PART IS, *DARTH SIDIOUS,* MY PEOPLE DON'T EVEN NEED ME TO SEE THE PLAN THROUGH. I'VE ALREADY DONE MY PART.

IT DOESN'T MATTER IF I LIVE.

"AS LONG AS YOU *DIE*."

TARGET ALL ESCAPE PODS.

THERE WILL *BE* NO ESCAPE.

YES, MY EMPEROR.

WELL, THAT COULD HAVE GONE BETTER.

WHAT NOW?

FIRST... WE THANK THE FORCE THAT WE'RE STILL ALIVE.

SHHHK

NOW, NOW.

LET'S NOT BE HASTY.

Mustafar.

"DID YOU SENSE IT, MY APPRENTICE?"

I DID, MY MASTER. A STORM WITHIN THE DARK SIDE.

THE WOMAN CLAIMED SHE FOUND SOMETHING THAT SHOULD REMAIN LOST.

SHE CLAIMS TO HAVE THE *FERMATA CAGE.*

YOU WILL FIND IT AND BRING IT TO ME AND DESTROY ANYONE WITH KNOWLEDGE OF ITS EXISTENCE.

NOTHING MUST STAND IN YOUR WAY. DO YOU UNDERSTAND, LORD VADER?

IT WILL BE DONE, MY MASTER.

"DO YOU THINK PALPATINE REALIZED YOU WERE NEVER ABOARD THE *VERMILLION*?"

IF HE DIDN'T, CHANATH, HE WILL EVENTUALLY.

BUT IT'S STILL AN ADVANTAGE TO EXPLOIT. AT THIS POINT, I'LL TAKE WHATEVER I CAN.

LOOKS LIKE THE *VERMILLION* GOT SOME ESCAPE PODS OUT.

SHOULD WE... GET IN THERE? SEE IF WE CAN PICK UP ANY SURVIVORS?

The *Siroto*.

NO.

BUT WE CAN HONOR THEIR SACRIFICE BY SEEING THIS THROUGH...

...TO THE BITTER END.

ARCHIVIST. REPORT.

YOU WANT A REPORT, QI'RA?

HOW ABOUT THIS...?

WE'RE *DONE.*

YOUR MAD SCIENTIST *FAILED.* WE'RE SICK OF BEING YOUR *TORTURE PUPPETS.*

THE KNIGHTS OF REN ARE OFFICIALLY...

...NO LONGER AT YOUR DISPOSAL.

AND HERE'S SOME FREE ADVICE.

TURNING THAT THING ON FELT LIKE A TURBOLASER *SPOTLIGHT* IN THE DARK SIDE. IF PALPATINE AND VADER AREN'T ALREADY ON THEIR WAY, THEY WILL BE SOON.

I'D GET YOUR STUPID GADGETS AND GET THE HELL OUT.

WHAT NOW, QI'RA? WE JUST LOST THE KNIGHTS...I'M NOT SURE...

IT CHANGES NOTHING. YOU'VE STILL GOT KHO PHON FARUS' ASCENDANT TECHNOLOGY AND ALL OUR OTHER RESOURCES. REN AND HIS PEOPLE WERE UTTERLY UNRELIABLE.

I KNEW THEY WOULD LEAVE EVENTUALLY. THEY'VE SERVED THEIR PURPOSE.

PACK UP. MOVE TO THE NEXT SITE. TAKE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED AND *DO BETTER NEXT TIME.*

QI'RA...WE JUST LOST YOUR FLAGSHIP, ALONG WITH SOME OF YOUR BEST PEOPLE. THE EMPEROR KNOWS YOUR NAME AND YOUR FACE AND KNOWS YOU WANT HIM DEAD.

YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO USE YOUR BIGGEST WEAPON, AND YOU JUST LOST SOME OF OUR BEST ASSETS FOR FIGHTING FORCE USERS.

I JUST...

DON'T WORRY, CHANATH CHA.

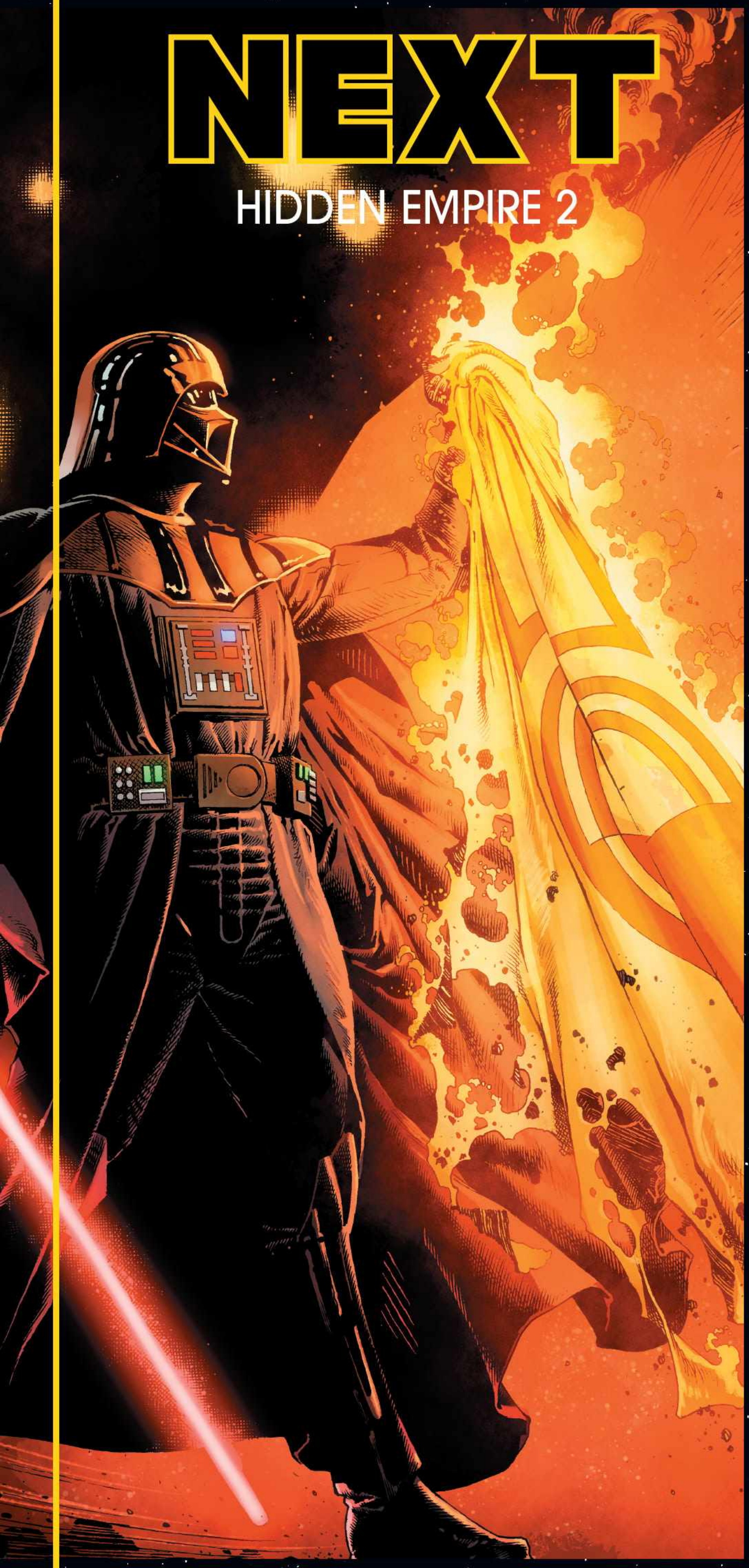
THIS IS ALL PART OF THE PLAN.

IT WAS *NOT* ALL PART OF THE PLAN.

To be continued....

NEXT

HIDDEN EMPIRE 2



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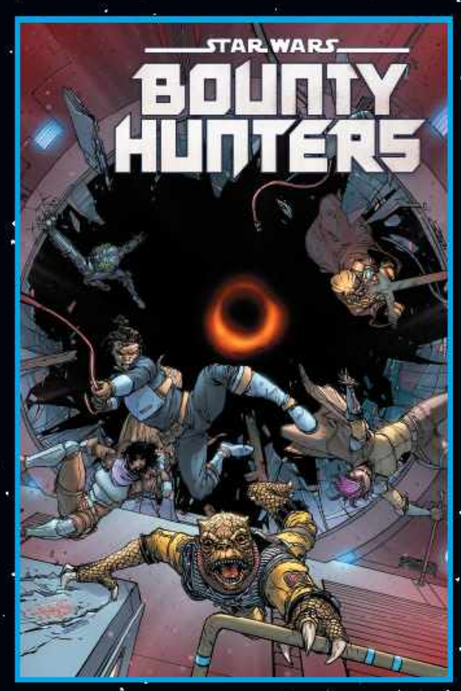

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